

CAMPUS ARCHITECTURE is CAMPUS MARKETING

From Celebrity Architects to Luxury Dorms, Colleges Make Building Decisions in an Attempt to Draw Students and Support

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Architect Peter Kuttner is talking about trends in campus architecture: “The latest thing is ‘live and learn’—putting classrooms right in the freshman dorms, so you go to class with the people you live with. My son was in one. He liked it because he could go to class in his pajamas.”

Architect Chad Floyd reports on the new recreation center at Tulane (which boasts a Department of Campus Recreation “to satisfy your fitness and leisure needs”): “They have two pools—an outdoor and an indoor. Kids sit around the outdoor pool sipping piña coladas.”

Perhaps you had a father like mine, who admonished me that college isn’t about fun and games. Sorry, Dad. These days, college isn’t just an education—it’s a lifestyle.

No one knows that better than college and university administrators—especially the directors of admissions, who are on the frontline of the competition for prospective students. They know that the size of the applicant pool and the eventual admissions yield frequently depend on one factor: the campus tour. And that means that the weapon of choice in the marketing wars is architecture, specifically architecture that matches the expectations of prospective students.

“With the dramatic rise in tuition,” observes James Crissman, a Watertown, Mass., architect and consultant to academic institutions embarking on building projects, “you might think the logical response would be more Spartan facilities, to show that you’re holding costs down. Instead the opposite is true. Students want the most for their money.”

Indeed, today’s students are sophisticated consumers who shop for colleges the way they shop for anything else. Colleges have responded with equal sophistication, hiring celebrity architects and focusing on facilities that offer the cushy amenities that students expect: posh dorms resembling condos; restaurant-like dining facilities with satellite “bistros”; recreation centers resembling health clubs, complete with juice bars. With the exception of an uptick in laboratory construction, the focus has been almost entirely on what might be called “lifestyle buildings,” which, as Peter Kuttner,

president of Cambridge Seven Associates in Cambridge, Mass., points out, also happen to be appealing “naming opportunities” for prospective donors.

Branding, lifestyle, naming opportunities ... it wasn’t always this way. Many New England campuses are blessed with beautiful buildings that grew from other impulses. Architecture had an unquestioned place in cultural and intellectual life; some educators also believed building design could contribute to moral as well as scholastic development—that it could even be inspirational. “Edward Thring, the Victorian headmaster of Uppingham in England, commented that ‘to have a good school, a man had to have good buildings,’” notes William Morgan, a professor of architectural history at Wheaton College who has studied campus architecture. “It was a pervasive sentiment in the 19th century. Educators were very conscious of civic responsibility.”

Others believed that good architecture could secure a place for their institutions in the intellectual firmament. “As president of Princeton,” says Morgan, “Woodrow Wilson chose the Gothic style for the campus, saying that with that simple move, he had ‘added a thousand years to the history of Princeton.’”

But “adding history” eventually fell out of fashion. Following World War II, the GI Bill opened higher education to waves of new students, and colleges needed space fast. The prevailing Modern style, a relatively less expensive style of architecture, allowed colleges to build more for less by touting the maxim that less is more. Modernism also matched the growing spirit of intellectual freedom; a progressive institution demanded progressive buildings. Like Le Corbusier’s Carpenter Center at Harvard and Eero Saarinen’s hockey rink at Yale, these tended to be buildings that deliberately defied the architectural traditions of the campus.

Perhaps inevitably, architectural defiance in turn fell out of fashion, following trends in design but also in response to an increasingly conservative student population. “Students are extremely conservative—shockingly so,” observes Chad Floyd, a partner in Centerbrook Architects in Essex, Conn. “They are the most conservative voices on campus committees and the most determined protectors of tradition.”



MIT's 224 Albany Street Graduate Dormitory designed by the Cambridge, Mass.-based S/L/A/M Collaborative includes a house master's penthouse apartment with city views. Photo copyright © by Woodruff/Brown Photographers, 2002.

When the last of the baby boomers passed traditional college age, campus administrators confronted serious demographic challenges. "Marketing" took hold in educational parlance and in campus building decisions. For example, Floyd notes that prospective community college students are attracted to buildings that look corporate, suggesting the work world that some of them come from and to which many of them aspire. After nearly two decades of marketing experience, it seems that colleges and universities have learned important lessons. The difference today is that their target audiences have learned their lessons, too, and now come from a consumerist culture that makes them very demanding customers.

Colleges are quick to adopt what works for the competition. "The strength of many small colleges has been their sense of community," Kuttner notes. "Now the bigger institutions that previously promoted their academic offerings are starting to focus on community." "Lifestyle buildings" can solve that problem, instantly providing appealing communal and social spaces. Others are using architecture to stand out from the competition. The University of Cincinnati is nationally known for its collection of new buildings by celebrity architects such as Frank Gehry, Michael Graves and Peter Eisenman. Now MIT is developing its own collection: with new projects under construction by Gehry, Fumihiko Maki and Steven Holl, it seems determined to return to its postwar architectural heyday when its Kresge Auditorium and chapel by Eero Saarinen and Baker Hall dormitory by Alvar Aalto attracted international attention. But it's hard not to see a preoccupation with commissioning a new Gehry building as a somewhat more expensive version of, say, a student's preoccupation with acquiring a North Face fleece or Prada shoes. Despite protestations about pursuing good design and good value, ultimately both come down to wanting what all the other kids have.

With the growing tendency to see campuses as three-dimensional brochures and buildings as photo-ops for virtual tours on Web sites, it's refreshing to talk to Paul LeBlanc, president of Marlboro College, where there is



The simple Vernacular-style "Out of the Way" dorm at Marlboro College, where the main academic building was once a barn and the admissions building a milking parlor. Photo courtesy of Cullen Schneider.

no sports program and the 320-member student body recently voted *against* putting cable TV in the dorms. Marlboro is in the midst of an ambitious building program, with new structures by Deborah Berke, Turner Brooks, Brian Mackay-Lyons, Roc Caivano and Dan Scully—all well-known in the architectural academy, but hardly brand names. "We started by posing three questions," LeBlanc recalls. "How should a serious intellectual community approach this process? How should we respond to the Vermont ethic of small is better? How can we respect the vernacular? The goal is to build in harmony with the intellectual tradition of this place."

LeBlanc acknowledges that Marlboro, like all small institutions, is competing for students but says that marketing has not been the primary motivation. Cynics might suggest that Marlboro is only the most recent example of the famed Vermont brand extension, but LeBlanc's claim is borne out by the fact that no photos of the new buildings are yet on the college's Web site.

Marketing breeds cynicism. As the academic world emulates the business world and gets caught up in the never-ending pursuit of customer satisfaction ("to satisfy your fitness and leisure needs"), educators should look to the work of their colleagues, John MacArthur, former dean of the Harvard Business School, and Robert Edwards, former president of Bowdoin College. Both are legendary for their advocacy of architecture as a means of creating community, combining pedagogical vision with design excellence to promote a sense of community and to sustain the tradition of the "academic village." Great architecture—buildings that are inventive, that fit the needs of their occupants, and that demonstrate an enduring civic responsibility to their environment—comes from the passion of individuals. Great academic buildings are the last bastion of symbolic architecture that reflects our intellectual traditions and highest humanitarian values. After all, no one is building cathedrals anymore.

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